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Rich Raw Material in Need of Time and a Diligent Historian

Books

THE PENTAGON PAPERS. Based on investigative reporting by Neil Sheehan. Written by Neil Sheehan, Hedrick Smith, E. W. Kenworthy and Fox Butterfield.

Reviewed by Townsend Hoopes

The reviewer is the author of "The Limits of Intervention," a study of the American escalation of the war in Vietnam. He was also Undersecretary of the Air Force and a member of the Pentagon foreign policy advisory staff in the Johnson administration.

"The Pentagon Papers," as edited by The New York Times, are a compilation falling well short of definitive history. Moreover, it is likely that the same judgment applies with greater force to the sprawling immensity of the total document. As others have pointed out, there are major gaps in chronology and documentation; a basic deficiency is the lack of a unifying interpretation.

Nevertheless, the papers are raw material of striking richness, unusual scope, undeniable authority. They show us that each administration inherited a commitment from its predecessor, but failed or refused to verify the continuing validity of the assumptions on which the commitment was undertaken. They show a process of piling up layers of unexamined assumptions, some of which were true and some false, but many of which possessed only a passing circumstantial validity. Trouble arose either when the basically transient quality of important assumptions went unrecognized, or when there was insufficient political courage or political will to act on the recognition.

At critical points along the chronologic... papers also substantiate a line of retrospective analysis that, in my view, needs only time and a diligent historian to render it definitive. Such an analysis would run along the following lines.

In 1948 Indochina was the scene of a dirty little colonial war, an obscure struggle little heeded by the world press, a war made possible by the infirmity of American diplomacy in permitting the return of French authority in 1946. But in 1949 the looming Soviet menace to Western Europe, dramatized by the harsh squeeze on Berlin, gave rise to the North Atlantic Treaty; and here the French, realizing their country was an indispensable component of any coherent plan for the defense of Europe, bargained hard and successfully to secure American aid for their military effort in Indochina, as a condition of French adherence to NATO. Along with the aid, this bargain gave rise to the convenient catch-all explanation that the United States was acting to forestall the advance of "International Communism."

Also in 1949, the Chinese Communists drove the defeated and discredited Chiang Kai-shek regime to exile on Taiwan, producing charges of treason from the isolationist wing of the GOP directed at Truman and Acheson for their allegedly nefarious role in "the loss of China." The result was to traumatize American opinion on an issue of unexpectedly great emotion, and to create a set of domestic political pressures that made increased American aid to Indochina inevitable.

In June, 1950, either at Stalin's instigation or with his approval, North Korea attacked South Korea. Coming on the heels of very serious Soviet efforts to intimidate Western Europe, Berlin, Greece, Turkey, and Iran, this act of ruthless opportunism seemed final proof that the Western world was being systematically invested by a cunning and superbly coordinated enemy, operating on a master plan and recognizing no limits on the means he was prepared to employ. "International Communism" seemed a deadly, immutable reality. Korea and Indochina were perceived as two tentacles of the octopus whose head was in Peking, and who was in closest league with that other and greater octopus in Moscow.

It is now known, of course, that the relationship between Moscow and Peking was poorly coordinated and always strained, and that Peking's links with Ho Chi Minh and Kim Il Sung were superficial. China never played an initiatory role in the Indochina struggle, never controlled and often deplored the North Vietnamese leadership, and provided extremely modest material assistance. As to North Korea, Peking was barely informed of the decision to attack, and was from the outset gravely concerned that war with the United States on the Korean peninsula would endanger Chinese hydroelectric and industrial installations in Manchuria. Chinese military intervention in Korea was in fact reluctant, defensive, and largely provoked by MacArthur's reckless insistence on driving all the way to the Yalu River in defiance of Truman's instructions, but the undeniable fact of the intervention confirmed the worst fears of American ideologues (which by that time included most of us); it thus served to cast Sino-American relations in hostile concrete for twenty years.

The advent of the Eisenhower administration presented, at least in theory, an opportunity for basic reassessment of the facts. But the new Secretary of State was iron-bound to an undifferentiated global anticommunism, which made his acceptance of circumstantial evidence at face value a clear philosophical preference. Moreover, he was reinforced in this outlook (and inhibited from attempting a more flexible stance) by a clamorous claque of Neanderthal Republicans who found themselves, unexpectedly, in control of Congress. Dulles, subordinating his genuine distaste for colonialism, bent every effort to keep a weary France in the Indochina fight, vigorously encouraged and assisted by a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs (Admiral Radford) who believed a showdown with Red China was inevitable, and the sooner the better. Dulles held out to Paris the serious prospect of American military intervention, if France would agree to carry on *after* a grant of independence, a legal declaration that lawyer Dulles persuaded himself would automatically transform the conflict from a war of colonial repression to a struggle for freedom from tyranny. The French were prepared to make the necessary declaration, but were not taken

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